Cycling and the British: A leisurely ride through the National Cycle Archive

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Abstract

This paper is based on my presentation at the MRC's 50th anniversary conference. Firstly, it gives an overview of my book, Cycling and the British: A Modern History, which was published in 2021, and was heavily based on the MRC's National Cycle Archive. Secondly, the paper provides examples of some of the key records used in the book.

Keywords: cycling; archives; history

This paper is based on my presentation at the MRC's 50th anniversary conference. Firstly, it gives an overview of my book, *Cycling and the British: A Modern History*, which was published in 2021 (**Carter, 2021**), and was heavily based on the MRC's voluminous National Cycle Archive. Secondly, the paper provides examples of some of the key records used in the book.

Cycling and the British charts the shifting place of cycling in British society since 1870 when it was taken up by increasing numbers of people. Cycling is one word, but many things, and the book examines individual forms of cycling, including sport, leisure and transport, but it does not do so in isolation. Instead, it weaves together the separate and often disparate histories of cycling into a coherent whole. In addition to histories of sport, leisure and technology, the book utilises political culture, material culture and the history of transport with a particular focus on the motor car to show how a culture of motoring shaped – and continues to shape – cycling in Britain. In capturing cycling's changing meanings since the nineteenth century, it seeks to understand why people rode – or didn't ride – bikes and who these people were.

The arc of British cycling's history roughly followed that of western Europe. Up to the 1950s, there was an initial omnipresence of the bicycle, only for it to be superseded by motoring. From the 1970s, cycling's environmental qualities were increasingly promoted, which resulted in the bicycle's increasing political importance. This history has been underpinned by various common themes, including: the impact of motoring; traffic policies implemented by the state; the extent to which cycling and motoring have reflected changing social relations; the role of bicycle organisations, both politically and culturally; and the influence of elite sport in shaping cycling cultures more generally.

Despite general commonalities, there were significant differences in the British experience compared to its European neighbours. In the Netherlands and Denmark, for example, cycling as a form of transport was embedded in the nation's infrastructure, and has characterised their cycling cultures since the early twentieth century. By contrast, Britain was one of the first countries, along with America and Germany, to marginalise cycling by prioritising motoring; a process that owed much to reasons of social status regarding each form of transport. Belgium, France, and Italy, meanwhile, have used cycling as a sport to shape their national cycling identity. In Britain, however, this process was largely absent.

More recently, cycling in Britain has been characterised as a marginal, largely male activity and has carried negative overtones due to its image amongst the general public as an eccentric and unsafe activity. Over the course of its history, cycling has been associated with either low social status or the well-educated and Lycra-clad middle classes. As a

consequence, daily bicycle (or utilitarian) use has become a lifestyle choice and a politicised cycling activism and subculture has developed in opposition to the dominant car culture.

Cycling and the British is underpinned by four overlapping core ideas. The first is based on the notion that riding a bicycle has been a political act in its broadest sense. Most people who have ridden a bicycle have not consciously done so for political reasons – although a minority did. Instead, the book is more concerned with prosaic – yet still political – questions such as why do cyclists ride on some roads and why are there cycle paths? The act of riding and where it has taken place has been a product of shifting legal and political debates around cycling, which at various times have either bolstered or diminished its cultural status. Consequently, it explores British political culture and the extent of the state's role in shaping cycling's history.

The second idea is that the history of cycling has been bound up with the changing values of the middle classes – political, social, cultural and economic. It was the middle classes who not only created the modern world, but they did so in their own image. For much of its history cycling has been a mass activity, but it has been the middle classes who have largely shaped its direction and political discourse, which has stretched from the age of amateurism in the Victorian period to growing concerns over the environment by the late twentieth century.

Third, a history of cycling is also a history of the modern world, and the bicycle was an important agent in shaping it. The notions of modernity and the modern world are problematic for historians, given their teleological implications. Cycling, however, emerged in a period that was organised differently compared to what came before and what came after.

Finally, the changing social make-up of cycling, and how it shaped social identities. It is evident, almost a cliché, that the bicycle has been an agent for social change. The sheer visibility and act of riding a bicycle has demonstrated its potential to disrupt social relations to both those riding and those watching. Particularly for women, the bicycle has acted an emancipatory machine.

The book begins with the emergence of cycling as a growing and then popular activity during the Victorian period. Its first chapter examines how cycling became a middle-class recreation, especially for touring – a boom industry at this time – and, as consequence, how it reflected and reinforced middle-class values, especially amateurism. The Victorian period and Edwardian eras are also the setting for chapter two which looks at how the bicycle became part of contemporary popular culture. The main emphasis is on how the sport of cycling developed. The 1890s had

precipitated a boom in cycling more generally, but it was quickly followed by a crash.

The following four chapters cover the middle years of the twentieth century. This period has been largely neglected by historians of cycling, yet it not only witnessed the highpoint of cycling's popularity, but also its shifting political and cultural status. Chapter three examines the changing relationship between cycling and Englishness during the inter-war period through the prism of transport politics. Cycling's cultural status had been firmly fixed to a rural ideology, but motoring's growing integration into the fabric of British life challenged this ideal and thus cycling's association with it. The inter-war years more generally had witnessed cycling's second boom. Chapter four charts the birth of this popularity up until the mid-1950s and its consequences for cycling's role in British society. Cycling became a vital part of the outdoor movement as millions of people would ride their bicycle into the countryside for pleasure. Cycling clubs flourished, although even within this essentially democratic activity, there were class divides. Chapter five is devoted to sport and in particular road racing. The main point here is that developments were inextricably linked with cycling's political and cultural status. The development of the time-trial from the late nineteenth century up to the establishment of massed start racing by the 1950s is set in a narrative of tradition versus modernity. Chapter six is a standalone chapter on women and cycling, highlighting how cycling continued to be a symbol of female emancipation just through the sheer numbers of women who were now riding bicycles for both sporting and leisure purposes.

Boom is usually followed by bust and, following cycling's popularity in the mid-twentieth century, the book turns to the period from 1955-1975. In the age of motoring, cycling declined as a mass activity and especially as a form of transport, a victim of post-war modernity and planning. Cycling was forced to adapt to changing consumer tastes and look to niche markets. The flip-side to this marginalisation, though, was the relationship between the bicycle, politics, and environmentalism. The bicycle came to represent both an anti-modernist critique and a symbol of the bourgeoning environmental movement from the early 1970s. Linked partly to changing attitudes to the environment, and to a growing health and fitness industry, cycling became part of a new consumer boom in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The book's final chapter is devoted to elite sport. It charts the rise of British cycling from the sixties when it was still a largely amateur sport to its international dominance on the road and track in the early twenty-first century. Underpinning this transformation was a greater state investment in sport generally and the media's growing influence. With success,

though, came doubt as British cycling was unable to escape cycling's reputation for doping. Cycling's ubiquity, its many functions and meanings, and the ebbs and flows of its relationship with British society are at the heart of the book.

The research for the book did not completely rely on National Cycle Archive (**MSS.328**)[i]. Other archives were visited, including the National Archives at Kew and the Percy Stallard papers held at Wolverhampton local archives, while another MRC collection used extensively was the British Cycle and Motor Cycle Manufacturers and Traders Union (**MSS.204/1-2**). Neither did the research for the book include all the available archives. For instance, cycling records deposited in numerous local records offices and the Raleigh archive in Nottingham were not consulted. If anything, this gap highlights a rich history of cycling still to be discovered and recovered.

Nevertheless, the book leaned very heavily on the NCA. Out of the seven thousand plus items, I 'only' utilised twenty-four collections within the archive. Naturally, each collection contained varying degrees of depth. One of the largest was that donated by Derek Roberts (**MSS.328/N7**), which consisted of 76 boxes with 166 sub-folders of subject files, covering a multitude of themes and highlighting cycling's ubiquity. It was a useful place to start – for this historian anyway – as an *entrée* into the history of cycling more generally.

In general, the reliance on the NCA was greatest in the book's early chapters, covering the early history of cycling from about the 1860s to 1900. For many cycling historians, this period is the most exciting, certainly in terms of technology, with the different designs ranging from the 'bone-shaker' to the sociable and from tricycles to the ordinary (penny-farthing), before the mass production of the safety bicycle from the 1890s led to it becoming the dominant and standard model. It also ushered in the cycling boom of the middle years of that decade when cycling became a symbol of female emancipation.

As well as being the most exciting, the Victorian period was fruitful in terms of research, especially due to the explosion in cycling newspapers and the variety of sources it produced. For the first two chapters, the book explores these rich sources. The Derek Roberts' collection, for example, not only includes minutes of early Victorian cycling clubs, such as the London Bicycle club, but also contemporary advertisements of cycling machines and key individuals of the period, such as G. Lacy Hillier. One of the quirkiest was Albin, a music hall act, who performed tricks on an over-sized ordinary, again reflecting the popularity and novelty of the bicycle. Moreover, the Roberts' collection provides insights into the early development of cycling as a sport, from the initial focus on track racing to

the development of road racing, and how this form of the sport was based on timed handicapped events rather than 'scratch races', highlighting a peculiarly British approach.

Tourism was at the heart of cycling's early years, which led to the establishment of the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC) in 1878. The NCA includes the full records of the CTC, including notably a full run of its journal, the *CTC Gazette* (**MSS.328/C**). The *Gazette* reinforced a middle-class identity among its members, providing insights and debates into touring and cycling etiquette, such as wearing the correct attire for cycling for both sexes (although most ignored this advice). The journal also 'collapsed time and space' through accounts of tours in Britain (and in Europe) by its members and acting as an agency for national identity more generally.

The middle chapters of the book leant heavily on the magazine *Cycling* (**MSS.328/NL/CYC**). It was the sole survivor of the early twentieth century re-structuring of the cycling media. As much as a repository of information for sporting and cycling developments as a leisure activity, this journal was a lens into attitudes towards cycling at the time. A number of its journalists, for example, represented the 'old guard' who had been present during the nineteenth century 'Golden Age', such as FT Bidlake and GH Stancer. Nostalgia and conservatism were prominent themes. In some ways this was unsurprising, as the growth of motoring was taking over the country roads that cyclists once had to themselves. *Cycling* acted as an organ for the cycling lobby as result. Further giving a cultural legitimacy to the nostalgia for a rural idyll was the inclusion in almost every issue of the illustrations of Frank Patterson from 1893 up to 1952 when he died. His sketches represented an extreme ruralism as he attempted to capture a particular ideal of Englishness, shaped in a pre-industrial age at odds with a landscape increasingly subject to an industrial economy. Another prominent theme was amateurism, or at least the opposition to commercialism infecting the sporting side from the perspective of cycling administrators. There was opposition to mass start racing as it was similar to the Tour de France, which was deemed overtly commercial. Instead, the time-trial was promoted as the 'true' form of the sport in Britain. There was constant debate over these tensions during the 1930s.

These tensions became evident with the establishment of the British League of Racing Cyclists in 1942 (**MSS.328/BLRC**), which explicitly organised mass start races, in face of opposition of the conservative cycling authorities. It caused a split within the cycling fraternity before there was a merger between the League and the National Cyclists' Union (**MSS.328/BU**), which was originally formed in 1878, to establish the British Cycling Federation (**MSS.328/BCF**) in 1959. The records of all these bodies are part of the NCA, not only providing minutes of meetings but,

through their language, insights into the relationship between cycling and society more widely. The 'split' was the focus of chapter five, highlighting how the marginal sport of cycling in Britain was attempting to modernise itself and ape its continental neighbours by organising a national tour. Moreover, the split was covered in the archives, such as newsletters and minutes, of numerous cycling clubs, giving a grass-roots perspective on this controversial issue. These records showed that, despite cyclists being largely from working-class backgrounds, many (especially the older generation) opposed the split, when it was promoted as a modern forward-looking initiative.

The focus for chapter four was the inter-war years, and especially the 1930s, which were another boom period for cycling with more people cycling than ever before. Young, mainly male, cyclists organised holidays and camping trips as well as nighttime rides on roads largely free of traffic. Sources such as the club magazines and minutes of CTC district associations gave insights into what associational life consisted of for cyclists, its implications for sociability, and the bonds of friendship it generated. The journals of some clubs during this period – and into the 1950s – highlight how cycling clubs acted as a place to meet members of the opposite sex; many would later marry and reports of their weddings would be carried in the club literature.

Another artefact that highlighted contemporary cycling cultures from this period was an unpublished memoir from 1987 written by Arthur Cook (**MSS.328/N57/3/1/5**). It was a rare retrospective on the life of an ordinary but committed cyclist, providing a lens into the history of cycling across most of the twentieth century. Cook wrote about his time as a member of the Comet club and how its first rule was to promote sport and sociability. For him and his cycling friends, a dress code and looking 'smart' was important on club runs, particularly for working-class cyclists who worked in heavy industry. Yet he also witnessed the changes that were taking place and the negative impact of motoring on cycling.

In writing the chapter on women and cycling, the archival material was more fragmentary, typical of writing women's history more generally. There were some standalone archives, such as the Women's Road Record Association (**MSS.328/N/10/6/F**) and an early women's only club, Rosslyn Ladies CC (**MSS.328/M/249**), but in general the disparate nature of the sources reflected how cycling was a male-dominated activity. The pages of the *CTC Gazette* were more fruitful than most sources for histories of female, albeit, middle-class cyclists. Typically, the stories of working-class cyclists were more difficult to uncover – a not unfamiliar issue for historians of women's history – although club journals were a useful source.

With the growth of motoring in the post-war years, cycling faced challenges as a form of transport. This tension was explored in chapter seven. One response was from Eric Claxton who attempted to incorporate the bicycle into British post-war planning. It was Claxton who was behind the construction of Dutch-style cycle paths in the post-war new town of Stevenage. Ironically, the building of cycle paths in the 1930s had been resisted by the cycling authorities; by the 1970s, in light of the threat of the car, they were promoting their virtues. Claxton's file (**MSS.328/N/12**) provides an insight into the bicycle's place in the changing built environment, which characterised post-war Britain.

Cycling has been at the heart of the shift towards environmentalism since the late twentieth century. The chapter on the relationship between cycling and the environment benefitted from two files, one on Friends of the Earth (**MSS.328/NL/FOTE**), and one on an influential figure from the 1980s, Don Mathew (**MSS.328/N/107**). Mathew had links to several bodies, including the CTC and Friends of the Earth, and advised them on the use of the bicycle in shaping environmentalism.

Thus, the National Cycle Archive formed the backbone of the book. However, there was still a lot left out as there was just not enough time to dig further. If I did, the book might never have been written. Researchers need to know when they have attained a critical mass of research and write up their findings! Thus, there was no examination of cycling companies, which might have given a more rounded picture of the bicycle industry as it shaped – and was shaped – by broader cycling trends. In addition, there were numerous individual collections and those of clubs and associations which were not looked at. The NCA is probably the most voluminous – and under-utilised – archive related to one particular sport and leisure activity.

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References

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Modern Records Centre

MSS.204/1-2, British Cycle and Motor Cycle Manufacturers and Traders Union

MSS.328, National Cycle Archive

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Endnotes

[i] References in this format are to materials in the MRC's collections – see References for details of the relevant collection area.